

Occidental College OxyScholar

UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship

Urban and Environmental Policy

Fall 1993

Ray Flynn's Legacy: American Cities and the Progressive Agenda

Peter Dreier

Occidental College, dreier@oxy.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty

Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs](#), [Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dreier, P. (1993, Fall). Ray flynn's legacy: American cities and the progressive agenda. *The National Civic Review*. Retrieved from http://scholar.oxy.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1353&context=uep_faculty

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Urban and Environmental Policy at OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact cdla@oxy.edu.

RAY FLYNN'S LEGACY: AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

Can urban progressivism flourish in a climate that is also hospitable to the interests of business — developers and industrialists alike? Pushing the "city limits" implies striking this balance, but addressing the root causes of abject urban poverty may ultimately exceed the capacity of the most progressive urban agenda.

PETER DREIER

In 1987, the management at Boston's prestigious Copley Plaza Hotel ordered its chambermaids to give up their long-handle mops and get down on their knees to wash floors. In protest, Mayor Ray Flynn — the son of a cleaningwoman — moved his re-election inaugural celebration out of the hotel. Pressured by Flynn, the hotel workers union, local women's groups — and national publicity — the hotel reversed its decision.

Flynn, Boston's mayor from 1984 to 1993, never forgot his humble roots or the pain of poverty and disrespect. Whether you call it "fire in the belly," passion, or idealism, few politicians have Flynn's sense

of outrage against injustice — rooted in his Irish Catholic upbringing.

Unlike most public officials, Flynn knew which side he was on. Fighting with working people and the poor in their struggles for economic justice was a hallmark of Flynn's nine-and-a-half years reign as mayor — and as a national leader for America's cities. In March of 1993, President Clinton asked Flynn to become his Ambassador to the Vatican. He was confirmed by the Senate and left for Rome in July.

As the Los Angeles riots remind us, America's cities are still ticking time bombs. With the urban crisis gnawing at the nation's social and economic fabric, what do Flynn's

accomplishments — and failures — tell us about the capacity of municipal politics to address the plight of our cities? What can American progressives learn from the experiences of Flynn's activist administration? As America tries on a "new kind of Democrat" in the White House, is there still room for a New Deal-CIO-Alinsky-style Democrat in American politics?

THE PROGRESSIVE DILEMMA

Progressives in local politics face a major dilemma: Businesses can move, but politicians usually stay in one place. If local public officials move too aggressively to tax or regulate the private sector, business can threaten to pull up stakes and take their jobs and tax base with them. They also can mobilize a sustained political assault (often with the aid of the local media) against the incumbent for being unfair to business. Few politicians want to be stuck with the reputation that because they lost the "confidence" of the business community, they drove away jobs and undermined the local tax base. As a result, most public officials accommodate themselves to business' priorities.

Three major factors contribute to cities' relatively weak room for maneuver when it comes to promoting economic justice.

First, in an increasingly global economy, business is more and more mobile. The recent wave of corporate mergers and consolidations highlights this trend. As firms become more internationalized, their ability to set the ground rules of the game increases as well. As local or regional businesses are picked off by multinational

corporations, communities became pawns in an international business confidence game. Plants are opened or closed, expanded or contracted, according to priorities established in corporate headquarters. Obviously some firms and industries are more mobile than others, but local officials, unions, or community groups cannot always know when the threat of disinvestment is real. This puts them at a disadvantage if they want to "call the bluff" of businesses.

Second, America's federal system — especially the fragmentation of political boundaries and authority, and the uneven level of fiscal resources — makes it easier for businesses to play "Russian roulette" with local communities. This makes it difficult for cities and suburbs to form cooperative partnerships to promote metropolitan areas, and for states to join together to promote healthy regions.

If the U.S. had uniform rules and laws — regarding tax rates, environmental regulations, labor-management relations, and other conditions — it would be much more difficult for businesses to play cities, states, and regions against each other. Because our federal system allows states and localities to set many of these conditions, footloose businesses can look for the best "business climate" — low wages, low taxes, lax environmental regulations and a "union free" atmosphere. In this situation, many state and local government officials feel that in order to attract or maintain jobs, they have to participate in "bidding wars" to attract capital. This puts each participant in a weaker bargaining position and undermines the economic and fiscal health of all communities. Rather than promoting a

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

common national standard and a more level playing field, federal laws actually promote this competition. The Taft-Hartley Act, for example, allows states to enact anti-union "right to work" laws. Cities establish their own property tax rates and can cut special deals for particular investment projects.

Third, national and local campaign finance laws exacerbate the proclivities of public officials to align themselves with the priorities of "business" as a whole or specific industries or firms. In Congress, "bringing home the bacon" typically means giving federal tax breaks or subsidies to lure a company to one's district. State and local officials play the same game. The public and the press are no longer shocked that the campaign war chests of political candidates (particularly incumbents) are lined with contributions from businesses and industries that receive special favors. These favors often undermine the economic health of America's cities. For example, the banking industry's political clout led the White House and Congress to deregulate the banks, leading to the 1980s orgy of speculation and redlining, the S&L scandal and the current banking mess. Since the end of World War II, most military contracts and bases have been located in rural areas and suburbs, draining jobs and tax revenues from our central cities.

These realities led a number of prominent urban experts to argue that local governments have little room for maneuver to adopt progressive policies that redistribute wealth, income, and political power. The most cogent expression of this view — Paul Peterson's 1981 book, *City Limits*¹ — argued that municipal government poli-

cies emerge largely in response to larger economic forces. The market, Peterson argued, dictates politics and policy. Cities must promote private economic growth; the alternative is decay and stagnation. Progressive redistributive policies hurt cities because they entail increased taxes and/or reduced services for those residents and businesses that contribute most to the city's tax base and economic well-being. According to Peterson, only the federal government can promote redistributive social welfare policies.

In their highly-regarded 1987 book, *Urban Fortunes*,² sociologists Harvey Molotch and John Logan portrayed urban "growth machines" as coalitions of business, developers, labor, the media, and public officials, united in their quest to improve the business climate by attracting new investment. These growth coalitions steer local development policies to intensify land use, increase rents, and generally enhance the profitability of private enterprise.

This viewpoint became the conventional wisdom among academic urban experts throughout the 1980s. By emphasizing the clearly limited room for political maneuver, this grim perspective could hardly inspire activists to view local politics as an arena for progressive reform.

Just how much room exists, however, is rarely tested. Most elected officials are unwilling to see just how far they can push. But some are bolder than others, particularly when they are emboldened by grass-roots movements with political savvy and staying power. Indeed, what's missing from these grim analyses is the potential of political organizing, political skills, and po-

litical entrepreneurship in forging an alternative vision and agenda.³

Since the mid-1970s, in fact, progressive grass-roots movements have gained a foothold in running local governments. In a few cases, they have actually taken power. Their leaders and allies have been catapulted to elective office, including mayor and city council.

Most of these progressive regimes took root in smaller cities, mostly based in university settings, such as Burlington, Cambridge, Madison, and Berkeley, Santa Cruz, and Santa Monica. Among America's major urban centers, only in Cleveland, San Francisco, Chicago, and Boston did progressive activists achieve electoral success and seek to utilize local government to promote an agenda of economic and social reform. In every case, housing and community development issues played a key role in mobilizing supporters and in forging a governing regime.

Among the large cities, however, only in Boston did the progressive coalition remain in power long enough to carry out its agenda. In Cleveland, Mayor Dennis Kucinich, elected in 1977, was defeated after only a single two-year term. In San Francisco, Mayor George Moscone, who was elected 1975, was murdered three years later, along with his ally, Supervisor Harvey Milk. Upon Moscone's death, Board of Supervisors President Dianne Feinstein,⁴ a moderate on issues of economic reform and development, became mayor and was

elected in 1979 and re-elected in 1983. His successor, state legislator Art Agnos, was elected in 1987 on a progressive housing platform and with the support of housing activists, but he lasted only one four-year term, defeated in part by voter frustration about the city's persistent homelessness problem.

In Chicago, Congressman Harold Washington was catapulted to the mayor's office in 1983 by an energized neighborhood-based coalition rooted in the African-American community. Like Kucinich, Moscone, and Agnos, Washington did battle with the city council, the business community, and moderate voters, which limited his ability to govern and carry out his progressive agenda. Still, the Washington regime tilted City Hall policies toward progressive neighborhood-oriented reforms and helped him win re-election in 1987. Unfortunately, Washington died of a heart attack a few months later. The political coalition that brought him to power soon fragmented.

In contrast to these short-term experiments, a progressive regime, led by Mayor Flynn, endured in office for nine years. First elected in 1983, Flynn was re-elected to successive four-year terms in 1987 and 1991. (He left office in July 1993, in the middle of his third term, to serve as President Clinton's Ambassador to the Vatican). Flynn had enough time to carry out much of his reform agenda. In doing so, the Flynn regime demonstrated that, despite major

The public and the press are no longer shocked that the campaign war chests of political candidates ... are lined with contributions from businesses and industries...

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

political and economic obstacles, local government can be progressive and humane. Contrary to the gloomy views of many academic observers and media pundits, the Flynn coalition showed that it is not imperative for big-city mayors to play to racial fears (like Ed Koch in New York or Coleman Young in Detroit), or to embrace the growth-at-all-costs downtown development agenda, to be politically successful.

Lacking significant federal funds, the Flynn administration developed policies that looked to the booming local private economy in order to carry out these "redistributive" goals. Some of these policies took the form of so-called "public-private" partnerships, while others involved government regulation (such as zoning and rent control) of the private sector. The underlying assumption of these policies is that the benefits of the private economy's growth would not automatically "trickle down" to Boston's non-affluent residents; they had to be steered in that direction by government action.

FROM SOUTH BOSTON TO CITY HALL

Flynn's biography has many elements of a proletarian novel or an organizer's dream-come-true. The son of a longshoreman and cleaning woman, Flynn grew up in Gate of Heaven Parish in South Boston, a gritty working class Irish neighborhood where (except for college, a stint in the army, and now Rome) he has lived his entire life and attended daily mass. When his father took sick and could no longer work, his mother cleaned offices in Boston's downtown business district at night. A three-sport athletic star at South Boston High School, he went

to Providence College on a basketball scholarship, became an academic All-American, and was voted MVP at the 1962 NIT competition, where he led PC to the championship.

After he just missed making the Boston Celtics team, Flynn worked as a youth worker, high school teacher, and probation officer, and organized neighborhood youth sports leagues. He turned his sports-hero celebrity status into a political career. In 1970, he ran successfully for the state legislature from South Boston. There, he generally represented the views of his South Boston constituents. He supported unions, low-cost housing, and tenants rights, fought redlining, airport expansion, and welfare cutbacks. He advocated more state funding for special needs schoolchildren. He co-sponsored a bill to end government-funded abortions.

He also opposed busing, which a federal judge in 1974 ordered to remedy school segregation, igniting a major protest in Boston. Flynn based his opposition in clear class terms: he saw busing as pitting poor black and white families against each other within a second-rate school system, while affluent suburbanites sent their kids to well-endowed schools. Although Flynn opposed court-ordered busing, he never joined the right-wing factions that engaged in violence and often resorted to race hatred. He refused to join militant anti-busers, such as City Councilwomen Louise Day Hicks and State Senator (now Senate President) William Bulger, in a statement of resistance with racist overtones. While parents and schoolchildren were hurling rocks at black students, Flynn was walking

the streets, urging an end to the violence. His moderation alienated some of the more extremist elements in his own community. His car was firebombed and his family received death threats over the phone. Still, some suburban liberals, campus-based radicals and the pro-busing *Boston Globe* painted all opponents to busing — and all South Boston residents — with the same brush.

In 1977, Flynn was elected to a seat on the Boston City Council (all nine members were then elected at-large), and began a transformation from a parochial South Boston pol with progressive leanings to a crusader with citywide appeal.

As an at-large City Councilor, and an 18-hour-a-day workaholic, Flynn attended numerous meetings across the city (often several a night). He saw similar problems facing residents in poor and working class neighborhoods, whether predominantly white, black or Hispanic in population. He became the hardest working City Councilor, sponsoring legislation and pulling strings to help tenants in public and private housing (such as getting housing inspectors to respond to tenant complaints), fighting the utility companies for hiking their rates, and supporting unions, welfare recipients and working women — all while completing a master's degree in education at Harvard.

On the City Council, Flynn's tenants' rights bills were usually defeated by 7-to-2 or 8-to-1 votes. Flynn saw how his colleagues bowed to the city's powerful real estate lobby, the biggest donor to politicians. As City Councilor, and later as mayor, he often said, "Washington has the oil lobby. We

have the greedy Greater Boston Real Estate Board." His activism helped expand his citywide base. In the 1981 citywide City Council elections, Flynn was the leading vote-getter by a wide margin.

In 1983, Boston was ready to explode socially and politically. In the previous two decades, Boston had been transformed from a depressed, low-rise city of mostly white ethnic neighborhoods to a more vibrant high-rise city composed increasingly of young professional workers and new Third World immigrants. The city had become a magnet for real estate speculation. The downtown economy was booming, symbolized by shiny new skyscrapers, but most Boston residents felt left out — they weren't getting a fair share of the prosperity. Tenants (who comprised two-thirds of Boston's population) faced skyrocketing rents and condominium conversions that were pushing elderly and poor people out of their apartments. Escalating housing prices made it almost impossible for young working families to purchase a house. The city's poor and working class neighborhoods, especially black and Hispanic areas, were scarred by abandoned buildings and vacant lots. Arson was reaching epidemic proportions. A growing number of homeless people slept in the city's downtown streets, parks and alleyways.

The ugly wounds of racial division — exacerbated by the busing wars and highly publicized events such as the brutal shooting and paralysis of black teenager Daryl Williams during a high school football game in the all-white Charlestown neighborhood — were still festering. Blacks feared traveling in many white neighbor-

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

hoods. Few blacks even ventured to Fenway Park to watch the Red Sox — the last major league team to hire a black player. Banks redlined the city's neighborhoods with impunity. The public housing developments of the Boston Housing Authority, placed in court receivership for chronic mismanagement, were blatantly segregated. City government and private businesses had few Blacks, Hispanics or Asians in key decision-making positions. Mistrust of Mayor Kevin White's City Hall was palpable across the city. Residents correctly believed that the delivery of basic city services — sanitation, park maintenance, snow removal — was based not on equal treatment but on whom you knew in City Hall or where you lived. They viewed the White administration (in office since 1968) as distant, arrogant and corrupt — more concerned with expensive overseas junkets and campaign contributions from big developers than with the day-to-day problems of neighborhood residents. Faced with the burgeoning anger and a looming campaign finance corruption scandal, White called it quits in May 1983, leaving the mayoral contest wide open. Seven candidates threw their hats into the ring.

When Flynn announced his candidacy for Mayor in front of a public housing project — pledging to be a people's mayor, to share the city's prosperity with the city's have-nots — few people gave the maverick City Councilor a chance. He had no money. He had no political organization. He had few connections to the media or business establishments.

In the hotly-contested preliminary election to choose two finalists, Flynn and

Mel King, a radical black state legislator, helped frame the campaign agenda. At public forums and in house meetings, the major theme was the "downtown versus the neighborhoods." The issue that triggered the most debate was linkage — a fee on downtown developers to raise funds for affordable housing. Flynn and King were the top two vote-getters against the other downtown-oriented candidates. On the same day, two non-binding referenda pushed by the statewide citizen action group Massachusetts Fair Share — for enactment of a linkage policy and the creation of neighborhood councils — passed overwhelmingly. The voters had made a clear choice for a neighborhood-oriented agenda. Boston's progressive activists were divided between Flynn and King — a bitter split. In the run-off, Flynn bested King by a 2-to-1 margin.

What catapulted Flynn to victory was a grass-roots campaign that drew on the growing spirit of activism that spread across Boston (and many other cities) during the 1970s and early 1980s. It was embodied in groups like Massachusetts Fair Share, Nine-to-Five (an organization of women office workers), the Massachusetts Tenants Organization, and the Hotel Workers Union — militant, confrontational groups dedicated to empowering people in their communities and workplaces, drawing on the traditions of the CIO unions and Saul Alinsky's organizing tactics in fighting for social and economic justice. It also included a growing network of neighborhood associations that had spent the previous decade fighting the urban renewal bulldozer, the expansion of the Logan Airport,

hospitals, and universities, and the uneven delivery of municipal services. The organizers and leaders of these and similar groups viewed Flynn as the symbol of their anger and as a vehicle for realizing their potential. At the same time, Flynn's victory shocked the political world and caused anxiety in the city's corporate boardrooms.

BUILDING A GOVERNING COALITION

After the election, Flynn's challenge was to build a governing populist coalition that included working class whites, the growing minority populations, and the progressive activists — to focus on issues that built bridges between these groups. A key line in Flynn's inauguration speech projected this view of the world: "The hopes that unite us are greater than the fears that divide us."

Now, almost a decade later, how much of that vision has become reality? Politically, Flynn obviously succeeded. He was re-elected twice, in 1987 and 1991, with over two-thirds of the vote both times. He won higher margins in black and Hispanic areas of the city than among white voters — an unusual accomplishment for a white politician. But what did he accomplish in terms of his policy agenda? What's his legacy to Boston and to the nation as an urban leader? Flynn took care of the civic housekeeping tasks that are the traditional litmus tests for municipal officials — especially with business leaders and Wall Street. He took over a city with a \$40 million deficit, balanced the budget each year, improved

the city's fiscal controls, and upgraded its bond rating each year to the highest in the city's history.

Soon after taking office, Flynn immediately had to deal with the city's fiscal problems. His policy priority was to obtain new state aid and authority to raise new local taxes from the state legislature in order to balance the city's budget and improve its bond rating without severe cuts in city services. Many state legislators (including Boston's own delegation) were suspicious of the city's waste and inefficiency, and Mayor White's high-roller lifestyle. Flynn, a former legislator himself, recognized that

A key line in Flynn's inauguration speech projected this view of the world: "The hopes that unite us are greater than the fears that divide us."

he needed the help of the business community — particularly its watchdog group, the Boston Municipal Research Bureau — to gain the credibility to obtain the additional revenues. Flynn had to convince them that he would spend the money cost-effectively. He recruited individuals from the business

community for top positions in the city's budget and treasury departments. He established an advisory committee, including representatives from the business community, to improve management and budget operations, and took its recommendations to "open the books" regarding the city's fiscal picture (something White had refused to do).

Flynn also campaigned around the state — meeting with local officials, business groups, unions, and others — to convince them to support the state legislation. He argued that Boston's economic health was

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

key to the entire state's well-being — that Boston generated the jobs, the state sales-tax revenue, and the institutional foundation (hospitals, colleges, and cultural/sports) that benefited the entire state. (A few years later, when pundits began to argue that cities had become economically obsolete in the face of "edge city" suburbanization, Flynn would echo this theme as President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors: "As cities go, so goes America").

The Research Bureau gave the Flynn administration its stamp-of-approval and helped lobby for the additional revenues. Flynn's revenue package was initially defeated, but on its second try, the legislature approved it. The additional revenues, budget and management reforms, and the city's strong development market, also helped improve the city's bond rating. Neighborhood residents care more about the visible bread-and-butter matters. During Flynn's nine years, Boston built an unprecedented number of affordable housing units, dramatically improved the city's parks and recreation centers, broke ground on a new Boston City Hospital complex when most cities are closing municipal hospitals, and created the city's first long-term capital plan to fix Boston's streets, infrastructure, and school buildings, and add new precinct stations and recreational centers.

Addressing gentrification and the quality of neighborhood life was key to the Flynn agenda. This meant taking on some powerful political forces. Soon after taking office, the Flynn administration fought the real estate industry to allow the city to implement a "linkage" policy, requiring downtown developers to put funds into a

neighborhood housing fund. During Flynn's regime, the linkage program netted over \$70 million and helped create over 8,000 units of affordable housing. Flynn often battled with the landlord lobby to enact rent control and strong tenants'-rights laws — a bitter fight that helped protect the city's most vulnerable residents from gentrification. Under the guidance of Flynn's development director Steve Coyle (now head of the AFL-CIO's housing investment program), Boston instituted controversial "downzoning" safeguards, which halted the creeping "Manhattanization" that threatened to overwhelm the city's historic downtown and other adjacent neighborhoods.

With Flynn in office, the city regained control of the Boston Housing Authority from court receivership. In the fall of 1987, a few weeks before his first re-election day, Flynn announced a plan to desegregate the all-white BHA developments in his own neighborhood. When the votes were in, Flynn had won every ward in the city except South Boston. There are no longer any all-white BHA developments, and the integration of public housing has continued with only a few incidents of racial antagonism.

Flynn also put forward a local version of industrial policy, called the "Boston jobs" program. It required private developers who obtained city permits to hire Boston residents for one-half of all the construction jobs — minorities for one-quarter, and women for one-tenth. During Flynn's tenure, Boston stopped doing business with corporations that invested in South Africa and Northern Ireland.

ALISKYISM IN CITY HALL

These specific achievements are important, but Flynn's most lasting legacy will be the combination of his activist approach to government and his personal compassion. As Boston's mayor, Flynn was equal parts politician, organizer, and social worker.

Flynn brought a few dozen progressive activists — from Massachusetts Fair Share, tenant groups, neighborhood associations, unions, Nine-to-Five, legal services, and environmental organizations — into top policy and administrative positions in City Hall. But more importantly, he brought a new spirit — activism, idealism, compassion — into government.

Flynn personified this approach by being accessible, demonstrating his energy and his caring in many big and small ways — quietly participating in a memorial service for the homeless, jogging across the city and stopping to chat with people, visiting families victimized by a fire or other tragedy. Many of his key accomplishments as Mayor can be traced to his activist instincts. Regardless of the issue, Flynn was most effective when he was waging a campaign for reform and justice, not just presiding over city government from behind his desk.

Flynn and his activist cadre developed a new approach to government — the permanent organizing campaign. They actively reached out to include neighborhood residents in city government. He turned the tables on the idea that "you can't fight City Hall." More often than not, it was City Hall working with neighborhood groups fighting the banks (over redlining), the developers (to require linkage and other con-

cessions to neighborhood vitality), the landlords (for promoting gentrification), the elected School Committee (for ignoring the needs of the students), the state government's Beacon Hill establishment (for treating Boston, the state capital, like a Third World colony), and even the federal government. Like no other big-city mayor in America, Flynn took on the powerful on behalf of the powerless.

Flynn's relationship to the business community, and to organized labor, reflects his approach. In many cities, the local business community wields considerable political power — either directly (through campaign contributions) or indirectly (through the threat of disinvestment). Since the 1950s, a group called the Coordinating Committee (nick-named "the Vault") — the CEOs of Boston's largest employers — played that role, meeting regularly to influence the city government's agenda, from urban renewal to fiscal matters. By the 1980s, the Vault was still a powerful force in Boston politics, but Boston's business community was less cohesive than it had been in previous decades. The Vault was no longer composed primarily of the Brahmin social elite, but by managers who had moved up through the corporate ranks. A growing number of Boston's largest private employers — for example, Shawmut Bank and the Bank of New England — were purchased by out-of-town conglomerates.

Although the Vault served as a unifying umbrella group to iron out political and policy differences, Boston's business community was increasingly fragmented. Each faction — the high-tech industry, the banks, the developers and landlords, the

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

utilities, the money managers, hotels, and the major universities and hospitals — had its own agenda. Still, the Vault could mobilize business leaders to target campaign contributions to favored political candidates. Its research arm, the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, which monitored city finances, still had credibility with the media. What the business leaders wanted was a “healthy business climate” and through most of the 1980s, business in Boston and across Massachusetts was booming.

Flynn had received no support from the Vault members — or any other major sectors of the business community — during his campaign. In fact, he refused to take campaign contributions from developers (or their lawyers) with projects pending before city agencies. The business community was not pleased when Flynn was first elected. In the two subsequent mayoral races, most business leaders no doubt would have liked to find a candidate to defeat Flynn — as their counterparts

*For the most part,
...the relationship
between City Hall and
the business
community was an
uneasy truce, with
occasional brushfire
battles.*

in Cleveland had done with Dennis Kucinich in the 1970s. But Boston's business leaders knew they couldn't get rid of the popular Flynn, so they realized they had to learn to live with him and accommodate his agenda.

Flynn was never comfortable with Boston's corporate elite. As mayor, the few personal relationships he developed within the high-level business community tended to be with other Irish-Americans from working class origins. They served as his

liaisons with the business community. He occasionally called on business leaders for specific things, such as summer jobs for youth, support for school reform, and financing of low-income housing. When necessary, he would go on the offensive — doing battle with some of Boston's corporate heavyweights. For the most part, though, the relationship between City Hall and the business community was an uneasy truce, with occasional brushfire battles.

Several incidents reflect the Flynn regime's approach. In 1985, Boston's hotel owners and Local 26 of the hotel and restaurant workers union were poised for a long and bitter strike. The militant, racially diverse union had sent letters to travel agents, airlines and associations with scheduled conventions warning about possible disruption. The hotel owners association had advertised widely for strikebreakers and set up a hiring hall. But while the two sides were still at the bargaining table, Flynn quietly sent word to the owners

(through his police chief) that they could not count on the Boston Police Department to protect the strikebreakers from angry strikers or preserve order outside or within the hotels. Flynn's unpublicized action broke the owners' resolve. They settled — and Local 26 won an important victory.

A few years later, Flynn traveled to southwestern Virginia to visit coal-mining families during the United Mine Workers' harsh strike against the Pittston Coal Group — drawing attention to the miners' struggle

in the Boston media. While meeting with UMW president Richard Trumka, Flynn learned that one of Pittston's board members, William Craig, was Vice Chairman of Shawmut Bank, Boston's second largest lender and a powerful institution. When Flynn returned to Boston, he publicly threatened to withdraw the city's deposits from the bank unless Craig resigned from Pittston's board.

In 1989, two studies — one sponsored by Flynn's own planning agency (the Boston Redevelopment Authority) — found that Boston's major banks were discriminating in their mortgage lending, hiring, and branch location practices. Flynn was outraged. Some aides advised Flynn that he had little to gain politically by taking on the powerful banking industry. But Flynn ignored that advice and followed his instincts. For more than a year Flynn, working closely with community activists, waged a guerilla-style campaign to pressure the banks to change their ways. He met privately with the heads of the major banks and warned them to take action or else he'd raise hell. His aides met with community activists to hammer out a “wish list” of demands to present to the banks. Flynn announced a “linked deposit” policy to issue a regular city-sponsored “report card” on bank practices and, then, withdraw city funds from banks with poor track records, while expanding city deposits in banks that worked to meet neighborhood needs.

The result was an unprecedented \$400 million community reinvestment agreement — with the banks pledging to open new branches, change their lending and hiring practices, and work more closely

with CDCs and community groups. There's been a sea-change in the banks' behavior — and more Boston residents have mortgages, small business loans, and bank jobs because of it. In fact, Boston is probably the only major city in America where banks are opening new branches (five so far) in inner-city neighborhoods.

Like many cities, Boston had a large inventory of federally subsidized low-income apartment buildings — built or restored in the 1960s and 1970s — that had been abandoned by their owners after the tax breaks ran out or operating costs increased faster than the HUD subsidies. These buildings were more than eyesores or drug havens. They were visible reminders of government's indifference toward poor people — particularly people of color. Flynn and community activists waged a successful five-year campaign to pressure HUD Secretary Sam Pierce to turn over 2,000 of these HUD-owned subsidized apartments (in about 70 buildings) to community-based nonprofits and tenant organizations. He spoke at rallies, wrote angry public letters to President Reagan and Secretary Pierce, lobbied Boston's Congressional delegation, and urged Boston's Republican business leaders to use their White House ties to move HUD along. (Clinton's HUD Secretary, former San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros, is changing agency policy to replicate Boston's success in turning around troubled HUD projects).

SHARING AND USING POWER
Surely some members of the business establishment viewed Flynn as a radical. He

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

admired radicals and activists, but he remained skeptical of ideology, and believed that ideologues don't make good politicians. His heroes were St. Francis, Pope Leo XIII (the "workers' pope"); Paul Sullivan (the founder of Boston's first homeless shelter), his father (a solid union man), and Hubert Humphrey, whom he served as a personal aide during the 1968 presidential campaign (Flynn's first taste of national politics). Flynn had never heard of Dorothy Day or the Catholic Worker movement, but in many ways he embodied its spirit.

Like few other politicians, Flynn was willing to share power — not with other politicians (whom Flynn usually pushed aside), but with organized citizen groups. Flynn recognized the importance of empowering people to help themselves. He also recognized that having a strong activist progressive movement gave him more room for maneuver in dealing with the business community, the City Council, the state government, and even Washington.

The Flynn regime helped build a strong network of community-based non-profit housing developers, who became the backbone of the city's successful effort to build and rehabilitate affordable housing. With Flynn in office, City Hall gave neighborhood groups a strong voice in planning, development and other decisions, through neighborhood councils, zoning committees, and project-specific advisory groups. The Flynn administration funded tenant groups to organize against slumlords, community crime watch groups to fight arsonists and drug dealers, and neighborhood organizations to organize residents for community improvement.

In one unprecedented example, the city government delegated its urban renewal powers (including its eminent domain authority) to a community group, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Roxbury, to help local activists rebuild a decaying area of vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and sub-standard housing, owned by a crazy-quilt of absentee owners. Some City Hall officials — including Robert Farrell, the chairman of the Boston Redevelopment Authority board, who was originally appointed by Mayor White — warned Flynn that giving DSNi that kind of authority would set a dangerous precedent. Flynn ignored their advice — and soon replaced Farrell as BRA chair.

Activists and organizers across the country often pointed to Boston as the most progressive city government in terms of working with grass-roots groups. Of course, there are always tensions when politicians and grass-roots groups work together, particularly around the question of who will get the credit for political victories. The Flynn administration was not immune to these tensions, but there was enough trust between Boston's activists and the Flynn government that they could work together around a common agenda.

The bigger problem was one of rising expectations. Flynn's 1983 election was heralded as a dramatic reformation in local politics. Soon after taking office, Flynn embarked on a whirlwind series of "town meetings" in every neighborhood. On every imaginable issue — housing, crime, health care, historic preservation, race relations, recreation, street repairs, and many others — Boston residents expected dra-

matic improvement. There was no way for a city government to fulfill all these wishes, yet Flynn did not want to exacerbate people's cynicism or dash their hopes. Over the years, according to opinion surveys, Flynn had extraordinarily high approval ratings — both personally and in terms of his performance as Mayor. Even residents who expressed disapproval of some aspect of city services did not blame Flynn for the problem.

Part of the reason for this phenomenon was Flynn's obvious penchant for hard work and his constant visibility in every neighborhood. But another part was Flynn's persistent efforts to educate Bostonians about the responsibility of the federal and state governments, and the corporate sector, for the problems facing Boston and other American cities. Flynn realized that cities cannot, on their own, solve the myriad of urban problems. He moved into City Hall at the worst possible moment for a big-city mayor — when the Reagan Administration was slashing federal funds to help the poor, build low-income housing, and provide fiscal assistance to cities. The city's strong economy gave Flynn the opportunity to demand more from developers, banks and business in general, and he took advantage of that opportunity, but that kind of leverage was overwhelmed by the dramatic cuts in federal aid.

A few years later, especially after Republican William Weld became Governor, Beacon Hill would rub salt in Boston's wounds by slashing state aid. When the New England economy went into a tailspin in 1989, Boston was hit hard. Like other municipal governments dependent on the

regressive property tax (exacerbated by Proposition 2-1/2, the 1980 statewide tax-cutting measure that had thrown Boston and other Massachusetts cities on the verge of bankruptcy), Boston had few options but to cut programs. So while Flynn can be proud of his success in keeping the budget balanced, maintaining basic city services, and calming the city's racial tensions (especially in light of the Los Angeles riots), the last few years of his regime were tough ones for a progressive mayor.

WORKING CLASS DEMOCRAT

Many local journalists and political observers accused Flynn of hogging the limelight. Certainly Flynn has an affinity for the camera. But Flynn used this tactic not only as a way to shine the spotlight on himself, but to promote the causes he cared about. Most politicians try to climb the political ladder by playing footsie with the rich and powerful. Flynn used his office to draw public attention to the suffering of the homeless, to attract notice to the plight of poor renters, to create greater awareness about the AIDS epidemic, to rally public opinion against human rights violations in Northern Ireland and South Africa.

While the national press, grass-roots groups, and his fellow urban leaders recognized Flynn's efforts as both mayor and national urban spokesman, Boston's own opinion leaders never really embraced Flynn, his style of government, or his ventures into national issues. The liberal *Boston Globe* never forgave (or understood) Flynn's opposition to court-ordered busing, objected to his pro-life views (even though he never tried to stop abortions at Boston City Hos-

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

pital), and derided his proletarian cultural tastes. (Like our new President, he preferred McDonald's to up-scale cuisine). The conservative tabloid *Boston Herald* consistently rebuked Flynn for surrounding himself with "Sandinista" aides, for failing to give deference to the city's business establishment, and for supporting rent control and low-income housing.

Race relations is the most perplexing issue in America's cities—and Flynn walked a political and personal tightrope in dealing with Boston's tortured racial climate. Despite many liberals' stereotypes of the Irish working class in general and South Boston in particular, almost everyone (including the *New York Times*) recognized Flynn's personal role in healing Boston's racial climate.

Flynn recognized that racism often added an extra burden, so he supported strong fair housing laws, fought banks for their racial redlining, and supported affirmative action hiring and contracting in City Hall. But at heart, Flynn was an archetypical social democrat—a universalist in an era of racial separatism. Long before he had read William J. Wilson's 1987 book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*—which argues that race-neutral good-enough-for-all approaches (such as universal health care and full employment labor market policies) are preferable to race-specific anti-poverty programs—Flynn viewed race through the prism of class.⁵ He believed that people deserved good jobs, decent housing, affordable health care, and good schools, regardless of color—and that building bridges around common problems was the best political strategy. His rhetoric stressed

"fairness," "dignity" and "equality."

In reality, because of the disproportionate poverty among Boston's black and Hispanic populations, the bulk of the city's discretionary resources—police, housing subsidies, health care programs, building inspections, recreation and parks funding—went to these communities. This angered some white politicians and white neighborhood leaders. But Flynn's blue-collar South Boston origins, his "regular guy" demeanor, and his constant presence in the city's neighborhoods (a *Globe* poll found that almost half of Boston's residents had met Flynn at least once) helped to dampen the racial animosity that a more affluent "limousine liberal" might have exacerbated.

Boston was not immune from the overall decay of America's cities during the 1980s. Still, during Flynn's mayoralty, poverty declined, violent crime was reduced, and housing conditions improved significantly among Boston's minorities. Nevertheless, Flynn's even-handedness on race matters often infuriated some of the city's African-American leaders.

In 1986, a small group of African-American activists organized a secession campaign, waged through a non-binding ballot initiative, to create an independent city, called "Mandela," made up of Boston's predominantly black neighborhoods. Along with the black clergy, many black community leaders, and the city's business leaders, Flynn opposed the idea as racial and economically divisive. That opposition, combined with black community opinion, defeated the Mandela referendum within the black community by a 3-to-1 margin. Two years later, the secessionists tried again—

and again suffered an overwhelming defeat. But both the Boston and national media (including *Newsweek*, the *New York Times* and the Phil Donahue show) gave sensational attention to the secession effort.

In fact, the Boston media consistently down-played Flynn's overwhelming popularity among black voters, while highlighting the antagonism of some black politicians and separatists toward Flynn. A few years ago, when a maverick black activist threatened a "massive demonstration" against Flynn at a scheduled Martin Luther King Day event, the *Herald* put the story on the front page. When only three people showed up to protest, the media ignored it.

Although the media tended to simplistically label him an "economic liberal" and a "cultural conservative," Flynn's views on so-called "social issues" are not easy to categorize. Flynn was a strong advocate of gun control (he lobbied hard for the Brady bill), appointed many gays and lesbians to top jobs in City Hall, and was the first big-city mayor in the country to support the distribution of clean needles to help fight the AIDS epidemic. At the same time, he opposed the distribution of condoms in public schools (even though his top health care advisor openly endorsed the policy) on the grounds that it would condone sexual activity among young people. Though he increasingly kept his distance from pro-life groups, he continued to oppose abortion. Flynn never felt any tension between his

economic and cultural views, but many liberals and progressives were uncomfortable with, or perplexed by, what they believed was his inconsistency.

CITIES ON THE NATIONAL AGENDA

Flynn was a persistent critic of the Reagan and Bush Administrations' indifference to the plight of the poor. Whether speaking to

a homeless coalition in Nashville, a downtown business group in Cleveland, a labor union conference in Florida, or the National Press Club in Washington, Flynn was relentless in castigating the Republicans in the White House as well as the Democrats in Congress for their failure of nerve in standing up to the Reagan-Bush agenda. Many other Democratic mayors—looking to

the Boston media consistently down-played Flynn's overwhelming popularity among black voters, while highlighting the antagonism of some black politicians...

squeeze whatever favors they could get out of the Republican White House—thought Flynn was too vocal. One colleague called him a "bomb thrower." The Bush administration tried several times to discredit Flynn. HUD Secretary Jack Kemp attacked him on national television.

Throughout his years as mayor, Flynn played an active role in the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM). From 1985 to 1991, he chaired the organization's task force on hunger, homelessness and poverty. He worked relentlessly to push the national media, his fellow mayors, and Congress to address these issues. He developed a close friendship with the nation's grass-roots housing activists, including Mitch Snyder.

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

Together, in the middle of the Reagan years, they successfully pushed for legislation (the McKinney Act) to fund housing and health care programs for the homeless. In 1989, Flynn worked with Snyder and others to organize a huge "Housing Now" march on Washington, bringing church leaders, unions, and other groups into the mobilization effort for more low-income housing.

Based on the success of Boston's non-profit community development corporations in building low-income housing, Flynn pushed for federal legislation to give federal housing funds to the burgeoning CDC movement. In 1987, he persuaded Representative Joseph Kennedy to introduce the bill and, after three years of active lobbying, the Community Housing Partnership program was enacted in 1990.

Based on his experience battling Boston's banks over lending discrimination, Flynn worked closely with national activist groups like ACORN and the Financial Democracy Campaign to strengthen the federal Community Reinvestment Act — writing public letters and op-ed columns, lobbying Congress, and urging fellow mayors to support consumer-oriented bank reform. In 1989 and again in 1990, with the S&L debacle on the front pages, Congress toughened the country's limp anti-redlining law.

As president of the USCM from 1991 to 1992, Flynn used the position to heighten national attention to the plight of the cities, the poor, and the powerless, and to push for more funds for housing and child care. Under his leadership, the USCM became a much more activist group. Mike Brown, the USCM public relations staffer, observed

that the group's public visibility — reflected in press clippings as well as its profile in Congress — dramatically increased during Flynn's tenure (1991-92) as president.

Soon after Flynn was elected head of the USCM, he proposed — at a meeting of its executive board on Cape Cod in August 1991 — that the group organize a "Save Our Cities" march on Washington to coincide with the Presidential campaign the next year. His fellow mayors and the USCM staff expressed doubts about the idea. It would mean raising money, mobilizing grass-roots support, and possibly disrupting the Presidential campaign. But Flynn persisted and pushed his reluctant colleagues to go along. The Los Angeles riots exploded a week before the scheduled march, and the rally — 150,000 strong, led by union leaders, community activists, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Flynn and other mayors — helped focus national attention on the White House and Congress to address the urban crisis.

Throughout the 1980s — a decade of neglect — the USCM, along with the National League of Cities, the National Civic League, and various foundations and think tanks, warned that America's urban areas were ticking time bombs, waiting to explode. But the political winds seemed to blowing in the other direction. During the 1992 Presidential campaign, CNN's William Schneider, the *Washington Post's* David Broder, and other pundits observed that it was the first Presidential election in which a majority of voters were suburbanites, making it unlikely that national candidates would pay attention to the problems of cities.

Flynn rejected that logic — politically,

economically, and morally. As head of the USCM, Flynn remained neutral in the 1992 Presidential campaign, but he used the organization and his own public profile to push all the Democratic candidates to focus attention on the urban crisis. He authored op-ed columns in major newspapers, and made the Sunday TV talk-show circuit, criticizing the Democratic candidates for ignoring working people, the poor, the homeless, and the cities. Under his leadership, amid the Presidential campaign, the USCM co-sponsored a report with the progressive Economic Policy Institute, *Does America Need Cities?: An Urban Investment Strategy for National Prosperity*, that generated considerable media attention.⁶ When the Presidential candidates came to campaign in Boston, Flynn took them to homeless shelters and food pantries — not shining downtown projects. He asked each candidate to convene a White House conference on homelessness.

During the campaign, Flynn, on behalf of the USCM, unveiled a public works plan composed of thousands of job-creating projects "ready-to-go" but on the shelf due to lack of funding. Most of the Democratic candidates ignored the plan. Even at the USCM-sponsored candidates' forum in February, only Tom Harkin embraced the idea of a major public investment strategy to rejuvenate urban economies. But by June, the idea had taken hold. Bill Clinton and Jerry Brown incorporated the USCM plan into their campaign platforms.⁷

After the Democratic convention, Flynn campaigned for Clinton in 20 states and 50 cities, primarily among the urban poor and the predominantly Catholic

"Reagan Democrats" among whom he enjoyed a great affinity and was particularly effective. When Pennsylvania Governor Bob Casey refused to join Hillary Clinton at a campaign stop in the heavily Catholic industrial city of Scranton (because he objected to Clinton's pro-choice views), Mrs. Clinton asked Flynn, another pro-life Democrat, to join her. Flynn rallied the crowd, acknowledging his differences with Clinton on abortion, but pointing out the overriding importance of key issues like jobs, health care, and crime. Some close Clinton aides believe Flynn's effectiveness at the Scranton rally — and his general appeal to America's Catholic voters — convinced Clinton to offer him the Vatican post.

Many people within Boston's media and political worlds criticized Flynn for his extensive traveling for the Democratic ticket. But the Clinton victory offers some glimmer of hope for America's cities — in part, by shifting the public debate toward activist government. The President's economic recovery package included increases in urban programs — public works, housing, transportation, and others. A truly universal national health care program will lessen the fiscal pressures on states and cities as well as improve the living conditions of urban residents. Perhaps most important, the new federal "motor voter" legislation (enacted in June to ease voter registration procedures) has the potential to significantly increase voter participation among the (predominantly urban) poor.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

As a politician, Flynn's next logical step would have been to run for Governor. He

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

always resented the state government's choke hold on Boston's finances and its mistreatment of the capital city. In 1990, with Michael Dukakis not seeking re-election, polls showed Flynn to be the front-runner, but he decided against seeking the governorship. Polls in early 1993 showed that he probably could have won the 1994 Democratic party nomination. The contest against incumbent William Weld, a libertarian Republican, would have been difficult, but not impossible. Some liberal Democrats and Independents who liked Flynn's economic populism would have abandoned him because of his opposition to abortion, but Flynn's track record in Boston, the state's troubled economy, and his close ties to President Clinton would have provided a strong foundation for a winnable contest.

In fact, Flynn was gearing up to run when Clinton asked him to be his Ambassador to the Holy See. Soon after taking the post, Flynn began a series of quiet meetings with Vatican officials, American Jewish community leaders, and others to push the Vatican to recognize Israel. In his first few months on the new job, he returned to the U.S. several times to escort the Pope to Denver and to march in Detroit's Labor Day parade. He continued to speak out on issues of human rights and economic injustice.

Some observers predicted that Flynn would feel constrained in his new post. But in South Boston, it is often said that there are two legitimate ways to be a success—as an elected official or as a priest. For a poor kid from South Boston, being Mayor and then Ambassador to the Vatican certainly filled

a lifetime ambition.

Flynn's departure for Rome in July of 1993 triggered a heated contest for mayor. It is a sign of Flynn's legacy that—unlike the 1983 mayoral race—none of the candidates to replace him campaigned on a platform to overturn the previous mayor's agenda or achievements. While Boston's next mayor will have a different style and agenda, he surely could do worse than emulate Flynn's activism and social compassion.

Even so, there is still unfinished business in Boston. In some areas, the Flynn regime simply failed to carry out its agenda. In other areas, citizens need to redefine the agenda for a new era.

For example, Flynn had consistently attacked the elected Boston School Committee as a disaster. Its members exploited it as a source of large-scale patronage, ignored educational policy, and used it as a stepping stone to higher office. Frustrated with the status quo, in 1991 Flynn used his activist approach to win a change in the school-governance system, getting the state legislature to give the mayor the power to appoint the School Committee. But Flynn was unprepared for the challenges of reforming the schools. He and the School Committee members he appointed battled constantly with the Superintendent, a black woman whom the previous committee had recruited from Texas and given a multi-year contract. After two years of a Flynn-appointed committee, the schools experienced no appreciable improvement. Education must be a major priority for the next mayor.

Many Bostonians believe that Flynn mishandled his response to the murder of

Carol Stuart, a white suburbanite whose death seemed to symbolize the racial divide between city and suburb. After Stuart's husband identified a black man as the killer, Flynn sent the city's police into Mission Hill, a black and

Hispanic neighborhood where the murder occurred and the suspect lived, to find the killer. When it was discovered that Stuart's husband was the actual killer, it looked like Flynn's police department had wrongly scapegoated an innocent black man and reinforced the neighborhood's view of the police as an invading army.

The community's reaction pushed Flynn to appoint a task force to recommend reforms of the police department. Flynn embraced the task force's recommendation to set up a community policing program. But tight budgets and a reluctant police union kept the community policing idea from making much headway. Getting the Boston Police Department to work as neighborhood problem-solvers, as partners with neighborhood groups, should pre-occupy the next mayor's attention.

Some components of the next agenda can't come from City Hall, but must emerge from the grass-roots. One problem, however, is the atrophy of Boston's progressive activist movement. Indeed, perhaps the biggest irony of the Flynn years was that by bringing so many experienced organizers and activists into City Hall, he grabbed much of the best talent away from the neighborhood groups, unions, and other organizations that had helped create the climate for his victory in 1983. The Flynn

...perhaps the biggest challenge of the post-Flynn era is to recharge the batteries of Boston's activists.

government worked closely with and supported many grass-roots organizations, but many of the most successful groups fell on hard times. Hurt by Reagan's dramatic cuts to VISTA, Fair Share and Nine-to-Five folded within a

few years after Flynn took office, the Massachusetts Tenants Organization had difficulty maintaining its momentum, and the Hotel Workers Union divorced its progressive allies by siding with William Weld, a decision from which they haven't recovered. The labor movement forged a short-lived progressive coalition with community activists—to wage a successful referendum campaign in 1988 to protect the state's "prevailing wage" law—but the coalition did not build on that momentum.

So perhaps the biggest challenge of the post-Flynn era is to recharge the batteries of Boston's activists. There are some promising examples, such as Parents United for Child Care, Citizens for Safety, the Massachusetts Affordable Housing Alliance Home Buyers Union, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, the Tax Equity Alliance of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Senior Action, and the Commonwealth Coalition. Boston's women's organizations have become stronger, but have yet to fulfill their potential in building bridges across race and class lines and mobilizing voters.

It's time for the city's religious leaders to put their faith into action. The clergy can play an important role in improving conditions in Boston's poor and working class neighborhoods if they mobilize their congregations and constituents around is-

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

sues, register them to vote, turn out the vote on election day, and build coalitions. This is beginning to happen with groups such as Mattapan-Dorchester Churches in Action and the Neighborhood of Affordable Housing (NOAH) in East Boston, but there is still a huge vacuum. A good model is Reverend Johnny Youngblood, who built a strong congregation in Brooklyn, New York by getting his church actively involved in concrete community issues and forging alliances with other churches and neighborhood groups.

Boston's black, Latino and Asian communities, which are growing numerically, must find a new generation of grass-roots leaders and elected officials who can build coalitions rather than fight over racial turf and patronage spoils. In 1983, Mel King mobilized the black community in the mayoral race because of his two decades of grass-roots activism. In this year's mayoral contest, the black community was barely visible. Grass-roots organization was weak and turnout was low. Likewise, white community activists must find new ways to forge alliances of mutual respect and find common ground with the increasingly diverse communities of color.

But these groups must go beyond their single-issue agendas. They need to build broad multi-racial, multi-issue coalitions among neighborhood, union, environmental and consumer groups. They need to unite and hammer out a clear policy agenda that can become the program for a progressive mayoral candidate. They need to find support from the city's foundations and churches.

What might some components of

that grass-roots agenda look like?

- Boston's strong network of non-profit community development corporations, who spent the past decade focusing on creating affordable housing, must become key players in rebuilding the city's neighborhood economies. That means paying more attention to job-creating business development that is vital for healthy neighborhoods. The Clinton administration has pledged to expand resources for CDCs. But Boston's CDC entrepreneurs have to get City Hall, the state government, and the area's banks and insurance companies to invest in the CDC's potential in economic development.

- After two decades of busing, perhaps it's time to return to neighborhood schools, not only as educational centers but as human service and health agencies as well. This may be what's needed to serve the existing school population (primarily low-income children) and to bring back middle class families of all colors, who have abandoned the public schools. But the initiative must come from the parents of school-age children, not from politicians. It must include a strong voice for parents, teachers, and principals in the management of local schools. School parents and their allies must organize to become a political force. Resistance from the School Committee or the teachers' union must be met head on.

- It's time for the 60,000 tenants in public housing developments—run by the Boston Housing Authority—to gain a greater voice in management. As mayor, Flynn helped the tenants in many privately-owned apartments, including troubled Section 8 projects, obtain more rights and

respect. With the city government's support, tenants organized self-help initiatives to transform their developments from "projects" to viable communities. With help from the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, tenants in the many HUD-subsidized projects in Boston—some of the city's worst slums—are starting to mobilize around crime and management issues. Ironically, the Flynn administration did not extend this effort to the city's own public housing tenants, focusing instead on improving the projects' physical condition and integrating the all-white developments.

- While full employment and gun control are the best remedies to combat poverty, crime, and violence, helping families and young people cope with the brutality of daily life—and providing a positive alternative to gang culture—is a key ingredient in addressing the problems of the inner city. Boston has many excellent private and public human services agencies, but to their consumers they form a confusing crazy quilt that undermines each institution's mandate. The hospitals and community health centers, youth and recreation programs, mental health centers, job training agencies, Head Start and child care programs, and other efforts suffer from the bureaucratic logic that sees people as "clients" with specific problems rather than as part of families and communities. Some cities, such as Baltimore, have brought the funders and the agencies together to develop a comprehensive approach to human service delivery. That can happen in Boston, too, but only when community groups, business leaders, and philanthropic donors demand it.

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY AND LESSONS

The Flynn regime in Boston demonstrates both the potential and limits of progressive policy at the local level.

Through his populist appeal and policies, Flynn broadened and redefined the "growth coalition." The Flynn regime sought to accommodate the development community (if not landlords), the business community, and the construction trade unions by promoting "managed growth" and "balanced development." Flynn also walked a tightrope between confrontation and compromise with the powerful business and development communities, while promoting a progressive agenda that has helped unite white, black, Hispanic, and Asian communities around common interests, as reflected in his electoral support in every area of the city, including the minority neighborhoods.

But even the Boston case cannot be replicated in all cities. Clearly, Boston's economic prosperity offered the Flynn regime opportunities that are not available in other cities facing economic hard times. Even so, other mayors in similar situations have chosen other options: promoting the downtown development agenda over neighborhood concerns, eschewing neighborhood involvement in planning, using racial and ethnic divisions for political gain.

The Flynn regime was willing to test the "city limits." On a variety of policy questions, it "called the bluff" of business leaders and firms who warned that business would disinvest if the city pushed its agenda. In doing so, the Flynn regime relied in part on the technical capacity and negotiating skills of city staff. They evaluated the pro-

AMERICAN CITIES AND THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

posed city policies and advised the mayor of their impact on private investment.

Ultimately, however, these decisions were political. Whatever their economic impact or technical feasibility, these policies had to be sold to the public while busi-

ness groups warned that they would undermine Boston's economic well-being. As a skillful politician, Flynn promoted a progressive agenda and remained extremely popular, as indicated by his overwhelming re-election victories in 1987 and 1991.

The efforts of Boston and other local progressive regimes play an important role in mobilizing the political will for a renewed national policy. They also demon-

The Flynn regime was willing to test the "city limits." On a variety of policy questions, it "called the bluff" of business leaders...

strate that with sufficient national resources and clear policies, localities and community organizations can administer programs without excessive bureaucratic red tape or corruption.

But no city can solve its social and economic problems

on its own. Progressive municipal policies can make a difference, but they cannot address the root causes, or even most of the symptoms, of urban distress. Unless the federal government is committed to addressing America's urban crisis — and finding common ground between cities, suburbs and all Americans — the nation will continue to stagnate in the increasingly competitive global marketplace.

C^N_R

NOTES

¹Paul Peterson, *City Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

²Harvey Molotch and John Logan, *Urban Fortunes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

³Not all academic urban specialists share this perspective. Partly in response to the success of local activism, some political scientists, sociologists, planners, and others offered cautiously optimistic appraisals. See, for example, John Logan and Todd Swanstrom, eds., *Beyond the City Limits* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

⁴Feinstein is currently a U.S. Senator from California.

⁵William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁶This Economic Policy Institute/U.S. Conference of Mayors report helped trigger a debate over the role of cities in national life, described by Peter Dreier in "America's Urban Crisis: Symptoms, Causes, Solutions," *North Carolina Law Review*, 71:5, June 1993, pp. 1351-1401. Soon after taking office, HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros convened a conference of scholars and policy practi-

tioners on the topic, co-sponsored by the American Assembly. The conference papers are collected in Henry Cisneros, ed., *Interwoven Destinies: Cities and the Nation* (New York: W.W. Norton, forthcoming 1993).

⁷After he took office, the plan became part of Clinton's economic stimulus package. The Republicans criticized the plan as a "pork-barrel" pay-off to the nation's mayors. Congress eventually passed a much watered-down version of Clinton's economic recovery and jobs program.

Peter Dreier is E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics at Occidental College, Los Angeles, California. He served as Mayor Raymond Flynn's housing policy advisor, and as director of housing for the Boston Redevelopment Authority, from 1984 to 1992.